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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a framework for understanding the complexity of the chief student affairs officer (CSAO) at higher education institutions, examining existing models and an alternative, "cluster-culture" model. It notes that current literature on the CSAO position is inadequate in its description of the roles, responsibilities, and orientations of the position. It outlines a four-dimensional model developed by Seagren, et al, (1994), which focuses on personal characteristics, job responsibilities, challenges, and responses. To address the shortcoming of the Seagren model, the paper introduces a "cluster-culture" model, comprised of a series of spheres of influences, all of which expand and contract based upon the context of the independent decision being made. It includes the four dimensions advanced in the Seagren model, along with six other areas: interpersonal relationship skills, external constituency groups, faculty groups, student groups, inter-institutional demands, and administrative influence. (Contains 10 references.) (MDM)

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Thoughts on Modelling in Student Affairs Administration: A Cluster-Culture Approach for the Chief Student Affairs Officer

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Abstract

Effective modelling in higher education administration provides the framework and foundation for examining both best-practice and training or professional development needs. Additionally, the use of models in administrative environments works to quantify much of the ambiguity of "management" in education. The current study examined models for administration in the chief student affairs officer position. Drawing from current leading models in academic administration, an approach is offered for the CSAO position based on diverse cultures which interact with each other and the individual in the professional position.

The study of student affairs administration has grown substantially during the past decade (Keim, 1991; Sandeen, 1991). In this work, little has been done to fully understand the complexity of the chief student affairs officer (CSAO) position, including the roles and responsibilities, the personal and professional demands, and the career implications of the position on the individual. Despite student affairs general success at understanding the environment of students and programming, the CSAO position has remained modestly addressed in professional and scholarly literature.

Compounding the need to study the CSAO are demands for accountability and service by higher education institutions and various constituencies, such as state legislators. No longer are programs simply offered to those interested; special interest groups call on and demand specialized and urgent programming and services (Kerr, 1991). For example, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 impacted significantly the division of student affairs. The ADA requires accessible buildings and facilities on campus, which has in turn forced student affairs officers to deal with such issues as construction, building renovation, and multi-media course material development.

With these changing pressures, more must be done to understand the CSAO and the training and professional development needs for those holding the position. The current discussion was designed to provide a framework for better understanding the chief student affairs officer, particularly giving consideration

to the context in which the CSAO must perform personal and professional responsibilities.

An Existing Model

Current literature on the chief student affairs officer is, at best, skeletal in it's description of the roles, responsibilities, and orientations of the position. Sandeen (1991) provided perhaps the most comprehensive discussion of the chief student affairs officer, and described the individual position as something similar to other administrators in organizational diagrams of higher education administration.

Accepting the paradigm that the CSAO is not unique to other senior administrative posts, then a guided detailed-model of the position can be offered. Adapting the well received model offered by Seagren, et al, (1994) for mid-level academic administrators, the CSAO position could be considered four-dimensional (see modified Seagren model in Figure 1). The first dimension consists of the personal characteristics of the individual holding the position, and dictate aspirations, beliefs and values, experiences, and demographic patterns which impact performance. This dimension is guided by a person's motivation and ambition.

The second dimension holds the job responsibilities of the position. Addressing competencies, characteristics of the division, abilities, and tasks, the dimension encompasses

what needs to be known and what the person must be able to do in order to function effectively in the job.

The third dimension provides the various challenges to the position, both those identified as essential functions and those alluded to or mandated by campus officials, including quality and diversity issues and accountability. More than the job demands placed on the individual, however, this dimension maintains that the CSAO consider personal motivation to identify and mentor potential successors to the position, consider future demands and challenges to the division of student affairs, and consider equity among hiring and programming.

The fourth dimension indicates how the individual will respond to job challenges, dimensions, and personal desires and aspirations. These challenge response strategies arise from both in-service and professional development activities as well as personal views of the position and the profession. Common within this dimension of the CSAO position are environmental scans and needs assessments for the division, self and staff development activities, organizational behavior, and changes to the position, the institution, constituencies, and personal characteristics.

For the middle-level academic administrator, each of the dimensions acts independently and as a system, where changes in one area may impact behavior in another. For example, a change in marital status may influence the amount of time available for professional development activities. Similarly, aspirations to assume a college presidency from a CSAO position may influence

the importance an individual gives to various institutionally-focused rather than divisional roles and responsibilities.

Cluster-Culture Model

The model advanced by Seagren and others has several very real deficiencies in relation to student affairs administration and academic administration in general. First, the model presented in Figure 1 relegates students enrolled in higher education institutions to simply a "constituency." As such, students must compete and apparently have weight equal only to alumni, state citizens, and professional special interest groups. Secondly, there is little room for faculty and academic support staff to be directly involved in decision making. Although the Seagren model was originally developed for department chairs, there is an apparent lack of faculty involvement in decision-making and sharing authority.

In response to the problems identified with the Seagren four-dimension model, an alternative conceptualization of the CSAO is presented in a "cluster-culture" (see Figure 2). The cluster-culture model is comprised of a series of spheres of influences, all of which expand and contract based upon the context of the independent decision being made. Each sphere is independent and can exert extreme influence over the CSAO.

The dimensions advanced by Seagren form the basis for the spheres, and each are accepted in the general context presented by Seagren's team. The dimensions are expanded, however, to

include six other areas which have the power to exert influence: interpersonal relationship skills, external constituency groups, faculty groups, student groups, inter-institutional demands, and administrative influence. In this model, then, a sphere can dominate the decision-making of the CSAO. For example, external accreditation policies on reporting student data may influence the CASO to make a particular decision (see Figure 3). Similarly, a crisis in the CSAO's personal life may dictate how office matters are handled, and in some instances, may lead to the delegation of additional responsibilities.

Fundamental to the acceptance of this model is that the individual holding the CSAO position is primarily acted upon, and activities to advance from the current position are secondary, but not excluded, from decision making. Therefore, as a professional career advances, select spheres of influence may have less control over the individual and the individual's behavior. For example, a CSAO may greatly expand the depth and breadth of job coping strategies, including more detailed knowledge of professional resources available on campus and in professional associations, the value of history to provide 'trial and error' experiences, and perhaps even more stability in selecting an appropriate response strategy.

Discussion

The chief student affairs officer (CSAO) faces a variety of challenges, including those not faced by others in higher

education administration: those of the social and personal aspects of the college student. Inherent in this added responsibility, then, are fewer ambiguities about academic content and greater emphasis on academic support. In this role, the CSAO must play the role of senior administrator, institutional leader, student advocate, advocate for faculty ideals on excellence in teaching, research, and service, advocate for institutional leaders, and office manager, budget officer, professional developer, etc. Only through the comprehensive understanding of the position and individuals in the position can student affairs advance beyond the existing perception of "second class citizens" on the college campus.

In search of the definition of the CSAO position, a number of administrative models appear appropriate. Despite the array of models available for organizational development and behavior, the framework advanced by Seagren, et al, (1994), provides a great deal of insight and application to divisions of student affairs. This model, however, fails in many areas unique to the CSAO, resulting in a modified version of professional performance. The subsequent result is a cluster-culture approach to professional performance and development.

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Figure 1

Adapation of Seagren Model for the Chief Student Affairs Officer

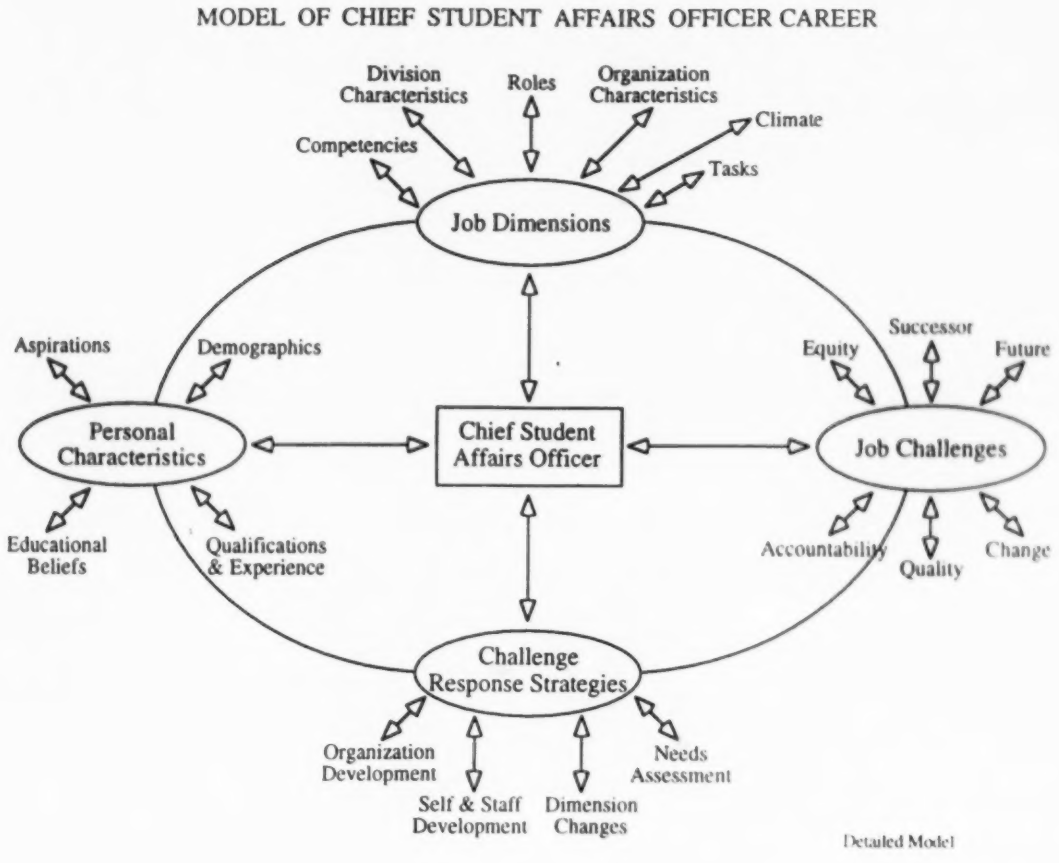

Figure 2

Cluster Culture for the Chief Student Affairs Officer

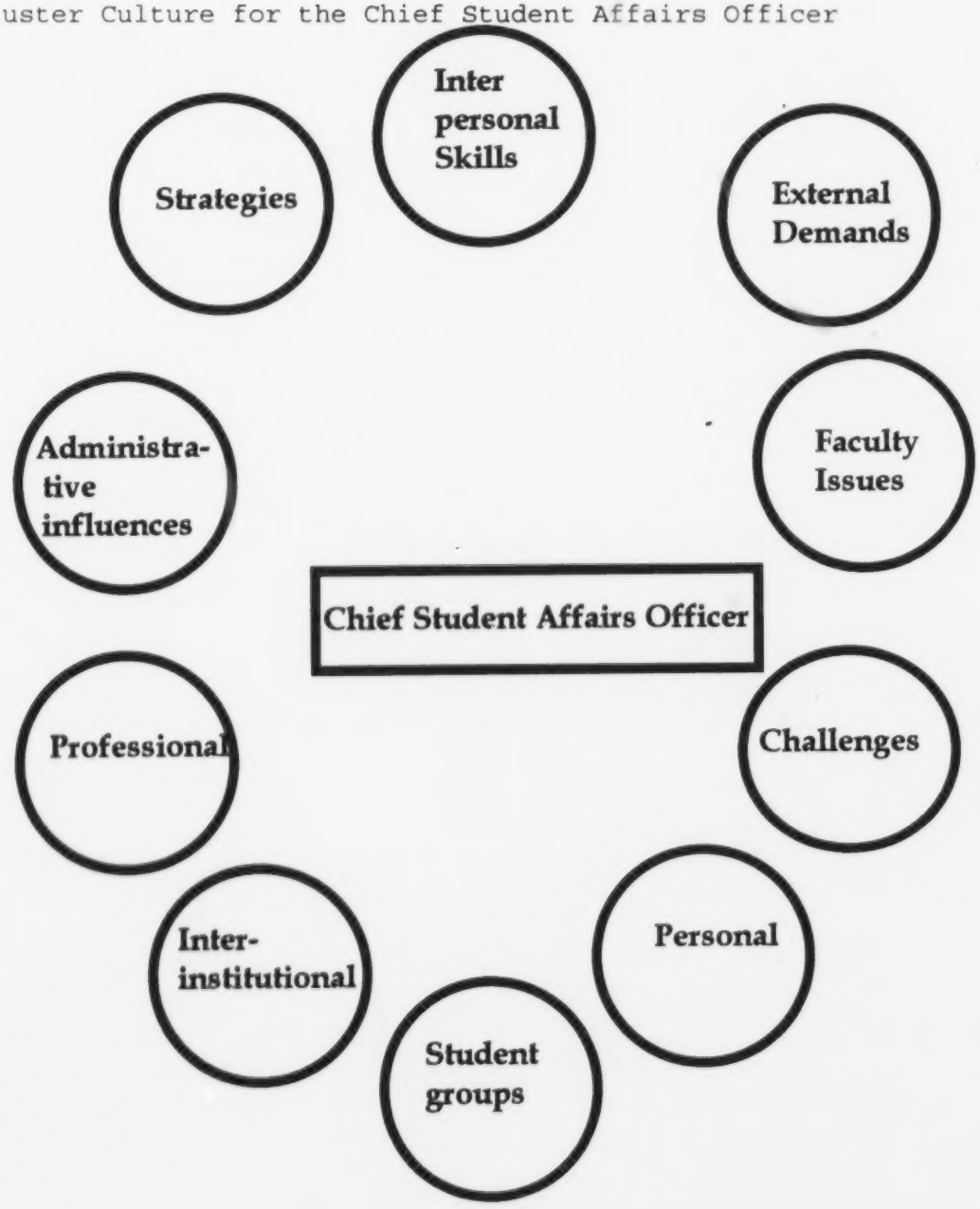

Figure 3

External-Dominant Cluster Culture